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A TARASCAN CACICAZGO
Structure and Function

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66 CACIQUISMO is a type of informal Hispano-American government operating to enforce the partially arbitrary control of an association of individuals under one leader, the cacique, a term derived through Spanish from the Arawak (Alegria, 1952). Caciquismo is a largely unstudied and partially covert feature of Mexican culture. It has long been dubbed a "national social problem."

[101] A cacicazgo is a concrete case of caciquismo. Our primary reference is to the cacicazgo in a village, here called Durasno, which is part of Tarascan society, a group of some seventy thousand Indians living in the cool green mountains of northwestern Michoacan, Mexico. Salient traits of Durasno culture are: a population of fourteen hundred, bilingualism, plow and hoe agriculture, corn as a cash crop, adobe housing, a corn-beans-chili diet, a total absence of handicrafts, and a leading role in the radical, anti-clerical politics of the state. The ejido land, won in 1924, is administered by the community and worked in plots by families of socially equal peasants. The generalizations that follow are based on a detailed description and analysis of the culture for the following historical periods: first, the indigenous culture of 1885; second, a troubled time following the desiccation by Spanish capitalists of an adjacent, life-giving, marshy lake (1900-21), coupled with the rising control of a regional landlord-mestizo-clerical faction; third, a period covering the struggle for the rich, black soil of the ejido (1921-26), with the crystallization of an agrarian cacicazgo; fourth, a period of twenty-two years of sanguinary contention between changing factions (1926-48); finally, a period of increasingly centralized control under the present-day cacique and his oligarchy. The methods and concepts of ethnology, political science, and sociology were severally employed. The political culture of Durasno was set within the total context of village life and the larger structures of area, state, and nation (Friedrich, 1957).[1]

594 The principal structural units of Durasno culture have definite and often discrete political functions. The primary relations between men within the nuclear family enjoin active political loyalty that has practically never been broken. (The one known case in 66 over fifty years in which brothers sided opposite factions is easily understandable on psychological grounds.) The father-son-brother block is the minimal and the most cohesive political unit of which larger structures are composed; intrigues must be conducted in terms of these blocks because every political act automatically involves all the primary relatives of both the nuclear families of the individual concerned (Levi-Strauss, 1945). The father in Durasno culture leads the nuclear political block. The inner core of a cacicazgo always includes the primary relatives of the cacique. The cacique leads this inner core and plays the role of an actual or would-be patriarch over the entire village. Older, charismatic caciques are called "tata," or "father," by the Tarascans. Thus the nuclear family has political functions in the village at large, and
612 these functions are especially important in defining the cacicazgo.
423 A second structural block in Durasno politics is the ejidal family, a group of one or
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612 423 66 more nuclear or bilaterally expanded families enjoying the usufruct of an ejidal plot, five acres of black soil. Such families are corporate, "nonunilineal" descent groups, with a locus of authority, which trace descent bilaterally from a common older relative who first acquired the plot (Goodenough, 1955). Almost all of the 218 ejidal plots are controlled by such families. They act as a block in politics and are represented by one head who votes at ejidal meetings.[2] The representatives of such ejidal families also dominate in the civil government since they include more than half the politically active nuclear families and, as a group, also possess the overwhelming mass of the community's wealth in private land. Occasionally a majority at an ejidal meeting will oppose the cacical authority.

592 66 The household, the third bilateral structure, includes one or more nuclear or bilaterally expanded families living in one or more adobe houses around one backyard. The majority of households contain ejidal families. The male members of a household, welded together by shared domestic and agricultural experiences, support each other during the ongoing political schisms and realignments; the members of a household operate as a block, which, unlike the nuclear family, can be divided by situational determinants.

612 66 The bilateral kindred also has a political function. Certain members of an individual's bilateral kindred, especially ambilateral uncles and nephews, and first cousins, are selected through the interaction of certain variables, such as ward residence. They function, among other things, as a politically supporting nucleus around every individual. The first agrarian cacique, for example, was principally supported by six first and second cousins, and the principal bastions of the present-day cacique are five (six till 1954) second- and third-degree nephews. In critical political situations this kindred stands firm.

621 612 66 A final type of bilateral structure divides the community into five large and several minor political "families," each with a core of ten to thirty men sharing a patronymic, plus a much larger associated group related to the core through blood and marriage, or simply affiliated through choice. Though the principles of alignment to these groups are numerous and flexible, all politically active men at any time belong to just one "family," and politics is conceived of by the villagers as struggles between such "families." They are the maximal political blocks within the village. A major event in Durasno political history was the exodus in 1935 of over thirty nuclear families belonging to one huge political "family." Informal political organization in the community is thus largely a special function of various bilateral kinship structures. These structures also partially define the structure of the cacicazgo itself. The cacique and his principal followers are each the focus of overlapping nuclear and ejidal families and bilateral kindreds, and they all belong to one of the large political "families."

608 66 Two other primary relations possess important political functions: ceremonial kinship and friendship. Ceremonial kinship is the compadre relationship between parents and godparents, formed on the occasion of baptism. The tie is stronger than that obtaining between first cousins and analogous to that of siblings. The compadre bond surrounds every adult male with four to seven trusted and loyal age mates with whom he has grown up and who are usually his social equals in this "horizontal system" (Mintz and Wolf, 1950). A political leader planning an assassination must reckon with the automatic if not immediate retaliation by some of his victim's compadres. Since good "fighters" tend to be related as compadres, a homicidal act against one of them may unleash a swift counterattack. In 1939 two gunmen who unsuccessfully ambushed a leader of the ruling faction were hunted down and shot to death within three hours by the friends and compadres of their victim. Individuals tend to vote and to ally themselves politically